

Beijing's Nervous Ambivalence about Crimea

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China's leaders find themselves in an awkward position regarding Russia's actions in Crimea. Beijing is reluctant to denounce the Kremlin's behavior publicly, since Russian and Chinese interests align on an array of important foreign policy issues. Moscow and Beijing have resisted U.S.-led efforts to unseat Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad, and both countries have taken a more moderate, conciliatory line toward Iran regarding that country's nuclear program. Such apostasy has led at times to vitriolic denunciations by Obama administration officials. On one occasion, Susan Rice denounced Chinese and Russian vetoes of a UN resolution on Syria, proclaiming that her country was "disgusted." She added that those actions were "shameful" and "unforgivable."

Beijing also seeks Moscow's quiet diplomatic support regarding territorial disputes with neighboring states in both the East China Sea and the South China Sea. Gaining such assistance is especially important, given Washington's increasing, none-too-subtle, backing of Japan, the Philippines, Vietnam, and other rival claimants. Beyond such specific issues, China and Russia share worries about Washington's dominant position in international affairs. Both countries are concerned that the United States and its allies are using their military and economic advantages to encroach upon important interests of other major powers in the international system.

In short, China has ample reason to give its strategic partnership with Russia high priority. However, Moscow's policy regarding Crimea sets extremely dangerous precedents from China's standpoint. Amputating the province of a neighboring state through military occupation and a subsequent, hasty referendum to give the "secession" a façade of legitimacy triggered multiple alarm bells in Beijing. Russia's Crimea annexation violated China's repeatedly stated position emphasizing respect for the territorial integrity of all states as a key principle of international behavior. Beijing's emphasis on that principle is hardly surprising, given its own territorial issues involving Tibet, Xinjiang, and Taiwan. The last thing Chinese leaders want to encourage is a precedent whereby one or more of those entities might seek secession with the assistance of a hostile foreign power or combination of powers.

Although Chinese officials have adopted a low-profile position on the Crimea incident, the Obama administration eventually became confident enough to state that President Xi Jinping shared Washington's opposition to Moscow's actions. Deputy National Security Adviser Ben Rhodes told reporters on March 24: "We believe the Chinese have been very clear in their expressions of support for a de-escalation and political resolution" of the Crimea issue, as well as "their general commitment to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of nation states, including Ukraine." Pressed for a clarification, Rhodes conceded, however, "the United States in general is far more willing to move towards the use of aggressive, punitive actions like sanctions."

That statement accurately captured China's ambivalence and its desire to avoid openly taking sides in the Crimea dispute. Washington's professed admiration for Beijing's commitment to the principles of national sovereignty and territorial integrity also was more than a little hypocritical. While China may be nervous and unhappy about Moscow's latest foray into Crimea, Chinese leaders have grievances toward the West on similar grounds. Beijing criticized Washington for the NATO-led military campaign to sever Serbia's restless province of Kosovo in 1999. Chinese officials were unhappy about that policy even before the "accidental" U.S. air strikes on China's embassy in Belgrade; that incident merely deepened the anger. Beijing became even more critical of U.S./NATO policy regarding Kosovo in 2008, when the United States and key European allies arrogantly bypassed the UN Security Council (and probable Russian and Chinese vetoes) to approve Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence.

Chinese officials and their Russian counterparts strongly condemned that move, reacting with disbelief to U.S. assertions that the Kosovo situation was unique and did not set any precedent. Beijing was caught in the middle a few months later when Russia employed force on behalf of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two secessionist regions in the Republic of Georgia. Moscow's move demonstrated the fallacy of Washington's assertion that its Kosovo policy could not be cited as a precedent. For China, however, the Georgian war also intensified a very worrisome trend. Beijing declined to endorse Russia's military action, much less recognize the independence of the newly minted countries, although its criticisms were muted.

China is caught in the middle to an even greater extent regarding Crimea. The unhealthy precedents of foreign-sponsored secession are mounting up, and Russia's latest action is most unwelcome. Yet the Obama administration almost certainly errs if it assumes that Beijing will side with the Western powers and impose sanctions against Russia. Chinese leaders carefully gauge both the global balance of power and U.S. moves in East Asia and other regions important to China's interests. Both calculations suggest that Beijing can ill-afford to alienate a major power that can help offset U.S. moves to contain Chinese influence. That means that China will likely continue its posture of nervous ambivalence in response to the growing quarrel between Russia and the West following the Crimea annexation.

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